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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON THE MEHLIS REPORT

Summary

-- The lead story in all papers today, October 24, focuses on King Abdullah's visit to Yemen to discuss mutual relations and regional issues. The second lead story reports on developments on Hariri's assassination following release of the Mehlis report, with attention focusing on Syria.

Editorial Commentary

-- "Mehlis' report: the end or beginning of Al-Baath [resurrection]?"

Columnist Manar Rashwani writes on the op-ed page of the independent, centrist Arabic daily Al-Ghad (10/24): "True, the United States and others are going to use the report to finish off the last of the Arab pan-Arab campaign of slogans, namely the Syrian Baath party. It is equally true that many will not be sorry to see that party and its heritage go. Thus, the real influence of the Mehlis report is revealed - even if the entire international community does not adopt negative procedures against Syria - in the Lebanese joy and welcoming of the report. The cover of the Arab pan-Arab slogans is lifted, and now we have to face the reality about the depth of the gap that exists between us, not just as countries but also as individuals and groups within the state. The Mehlis report may just be the declaration of the end of the Baath party in Syria and then the entire Arab world, especially now that the American invasion has terminated its existence in Iraq. Having said that, both that invasion and the report provide opportunities for us to acknowledge the termination of the age of 'pan-Arab slogans' that are no longer able to pull in our ranks. We genuinely need new thought and practice that lead to the real resurrection of the nation."

-- "Notes about the report"

Daily columnist Jamil Nimri writes on the back-page of Al-Ghad (10/24): "I read Mehlis' report carefully and I must say that I found its presentation of the work of the committee not very convenient. It fluctuates in terms of style and professionalism, so that there are boring details vis-a-vis some formalities and procedures, and extreme summaries of important clarifications.... The result is that the very strong suspicions do not leave much room for Syria other than giving its full cooperation to the investigation. This will protect it from international decisions and sanctions until that time when the investigation that could last years and the trials that could also take years are concluded."

-- "What's after the Mehlis report?"

Columnist Raja Talab writes on the op-ed page of semi-official, influential Arabic daily Al-Rai (10/24): "The Security Council will tomorrow hold a session to discuss the [Mehlis] report with the likelihood that it will call for completing the investigation and will ask Damascus to cooperate and to respond to the committee's demands.... This calls upon the Arab countries that are concerned for Syria's welfare to advise the Syrian leadership to respond to the demands of the investigation committee. I believe that the spirit by which the Syrian leadership handled the implementation of Resolution 1559 on Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon should be the same spirit by which Damascus handles the upcoming Security Council decisions. Otherwise, Syria would just be allowing America, France and Britain to get at it very easily. Going along with the international will and desire is not weakness and going against is not strength. The experience of the former Iraqi regime is still before us and it is an experience we do not wish upon our brothers in Syria."

-- "Tomorrow's Security Council session: an opportunity for Bush and his administration"
Columnist Mohammad Kharroub writes on the op-ed page of Al-Rai (10/24): "President Bush wants to direct attention away from his domestic problems, which are real problems and cause him a great deal of worry, not just because his popularity is deteriorating, but also because congressional elections are at hand and the loss of the Republicans would mean that Bush is held to blame. That is why he wants to use the Mehlis report for a political accomplishment, which he badly needs following the humble or insignificant political and field results yielded by the Iraqi referendum on the constitution and the rising indications that pre-referendum Iraq is itself post-referendum Iraq."

-- "Mehlis report, what's next?"

Daily columnist Fahd Fanek writes on the back-page of Al-Rai (10/24): "The Mehlis report was not written to be presented to a court of law but rather to a political entity. That is why Mehlis allowed himself to state not just facts and evidence, but also a group of observations and convictions that would otherwise be worthless in a court of law and that would create the required climate for further procedures such as economic and political sanctions. Hariri's killing might have gone by as easily as other killings have gone by before had the circumstances been different and had Syria and the Syrian regime not been targeted. America is not upset about Hariri's killing, but it saw this crime as its opportunity to tighten the noose around Syria's neck to bring it on board.... Syria's situation today is very similar to that of Iraq previously when it had been required to prove that it did not have weapons of mass destruction. Syria is now required to prove its innocence. In other words, the accused is guilty until proven innocent."

-- "The report: political rush and judicial delay"

Daily columnist Rakan Majali writes on the back-page of center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour: "It has become clear that the report is targeting Syria, and that the United States considers it a stepping stone for rallying international support for its plans against Syria by going through the Security Council and snatching whatever kind of condemnation, thus allowing it to get international coverage for escalating its pressures on Syria.... We believe that the investigative committee's report was addressed to the Security Council and that there will not be any legal proceedings."
HALE